

Away from Home: International Students in the Residence Halls

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Michelle Lisack

Thesis Advisor

Bart Upah



**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

April 2014

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2014

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE RESIDENCE HALLS

SpColl
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.24
2014
.L56

Abstract

International students have become a large and important segment of the student population at universities in the United States. Some of these students live in residence halls during their time abroad. This study analyzes the impact of the residence hall environment on students' adaptation to American culture. The results of this study show that one-third of students cite friendship as a primary reason for not feeling homesick while studying abroad in the United States. A majority of students also said that their favorite aspect of living in the residence halls is the social life. Some students, however, felt an increase in isolation and homesickness from their first semester at Ball State to their current semester, which poses some challenges for residence hall staff.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bart Upah for advising me on this thesis – it was a long journey, but he guided me in the right direction with his knowledge and experience. Thank you for all your help and support, both with my thesis and with my life.

International student enrollment in American universities reached an all-time high during the 2012-2013 academic year, with 819,644 international students studying in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2013). There were 854 total international students enrolled at Ball State during the Fall 2013 semester, and of that number, 70 percent of students were from China or Saudi Arabia (Slabaugh, 2013). Universities must adapt to this increasing international student population and provide more services that help students address the unique challenges of studying abroad.

There is not much research on the impact of university residence halls on the experience of international students. American residence halls are different from student accommodations in other countries – students typically stay in apartment-style residence halls or in off-campus housing while attending universities in their home country. Some former Ball State students from Europe commented that American residence halls had more policies and rules than student accommodations at home. Therefore, international students may view residence life very differently than American students. The purpose of this study is to determine what international students felt about their residence hall experience and how the residence halls influenced students' social transition to life at Ball State.

Literature Review

There are two models that describe the transition process for international students: the culture shock model and the international student identity model. The culture shock model, identified by Oberg (1960), explains what people think and how they feel when they are in an environment that has unfamiliar cultural norms and values. There are five stages people must go through in order to successfully adjust to the new culture. Those stages are contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. In the contact stage, students are excited about their

new experiences and identify similarities between the home and host culture. Students feel depressed or alienated during the disintegration stage, as differences between the host and home culture become more obvious; this leads to an outright rejection of the host culture during the reintegration stage. After this, students gain an understanding of the host culture, and they cease to be hostile towards the host culture. The last stage, independence, is reached when students embrace the similarities and differences between the home and host culture (Adler, 1975, pp. 16-18). Adler also noted that while culture shock is often seen as a negative experience, it can actually lead to positive personal development (p. 14).

The international student identity (ISI) model is another model that applies to international students, and it describes how students undergo identity development while in a foreign culture (Kim 2012). This model is comprised of six phases; students experience these phases at different times, and they can even regress to previous stages if they lack adequate support (pp. 107-108). In particular, the enclosure phase, during which students rarely socialize with people from different backgrounds (p. 109), can be challenging for the students themselves, their peers, and residence hall staff. The international student identity model is very similar to the stages of culture shock, though the ISI model is purely focused on the identity development of college students. The culture shock model can be applied to any person who is living in a foreign culture for an extended period of time. Overall, the stages of culture shock can explain some of what students may be feeling, but the international student identity model is much more relevant to this study.

There are several strategies international students can use to better manage the challenges of going to college in a foreign country. Making friends and creating relationships while abroad is the most important strategy. According to McLachlan and Justice (2009), international

students developed friendships with other students in order to manage their culture shock; however, many students found it difficult to form friendships with American students (p. 30). English fluency has been cited as a barrier to developing friendships with Americans, as it is easier for students to build relationships with people who have the same native language (Andrade, 2009, p. 23). When students form these home-country friendship groups, they feel comfortable and supported, but they become more isolated from the host culture as well (Hayes and Lin, 1994).

Other methods that facilitate students' transition include getting involved on campus and practicing English without being afraid of making mistakes (Andrade, 2009, p. 26). Integrated residence halls, where international students and host country students live in the same community, are also important; these halls provide international students with more opportunities to communicate and develop relationships with host country students (2011, p. 290). Building relationships with instructors and advisors and not being ashamed of asking for help are some other strategies international students have used to successfully transition to American culture (Tseng and Newton, 2002).

Many studies have determined that international students have difficulty forming friendships with host country students, but one study found the opposite. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune found that international students had more friends from the host country than from the home country. They concluded that students likely felt stronger bonds with friends from their home country, however. Their findings thus indicate the difference between deep and surface-level friendships and the effect of these friendship levels on the transition process (2011, p. 289).

There are several factors that impede international students' ability to adapt to life in the United States. Differences in food, academic expectations, and social life resulted in students

feeling homesick or stressed (McLachlan and Justice, 2009, p. 29). Furthermore, the perceived or actual discrimination faced by international students, due to their race or national origin, affects their ability to adapt to the host culture. International students also must put forth more effort to make friends from the host country, as host country students generally do not go out of their way to develop friendships with international students (Hayes and Lin, 1994).

Asian students in particular tend to have more difficulties adjusting to American culture than students from Western countries. Since many Asian cultures are collectivist, valuing harmony and team effort, Asian international students may be uncomfortable with the individualistic and competitive American culture (Lin and Yi, 1997). Students from Western countries may find it somewhat easier to adapt to American culture because the United States shares similar cultural characteristics with other Western countries.

Method

This study was conducted at Ball State University, a mid-sized public institution. 21 students from various countries volunteered for the survey, though one respondent did not answer any survey questions, resulting in a total sample of 20 undergraduate students – 8 women and 12 men. 60 percent of the respondents were from either China or Saudi Arabia, which is on par with the total international population at Ball State. Most of the respondents lived in Studebaker East, which houses the International and Modern Languages Living Learning Community; one of the respondents lived in Studebaker West, a traditional residence hall. The average age of respondents was 18.8 years.

The principal investigator (PI) made voluntary paper surveys available to students in the lobby area of Studebaker East on three weekday evenings. The Studebaker East resident assistants and hall director encouraged their residents to talk to the PI and take the survey. The

survey was completed by students at the site; after all 20 respondents had returned their surveys, responses to the survey questions were coded to identify themes and trends. The quantitative and qualitative survey can be found in the appendix.

Findings and Analysis

Student responses to the survey questions were generally unsurprising, but a few unexpected trends were identified in the answers to some of the questions. Responses to questions about homesickness and isolation highlighted the importance of friendship in students' transition process. The most cited reason for not feeling homesick was having friends. Of the students who had a low level of homesickness during their first semester in the US, one-third indicated that having friends was one of the reasons for their low homesickness. Other reasons for low amounts of homesickness included new experiences, previous travel experience, and dedication to academics.

Of the 15 students who responded with low isolation levels during their first semester, 13 said that either coming with friends from home, or meeting new friends at Ball State, resulted in low or nonexistent feelings of isolation. One student from Northern Ireland who felt low isolation said "I met an amazing group of friends who lived in Stu East too so we were never apart." These results are strongly correlated with current research: social connections and friendships with others help international students feel comfortable and integrated with the local community.

Though most students recorded a positive first semester in terms of homesickness and isolation, some students struggled when they first came to Ball State. Four students had a medium to high level of homesickness, and three students felt a medium to high level of isolation. One of these students said his feelings of isolation were caused by a "[d]ifficulty to connect with

other people.” Another student, who did not feel very isolated, admitted that “[i]t’s not easy to make friends with foreign people.” These comments reinforce both the difficulty of making friends and the importance of having strong social connections when going through the cultural adjustment process.

For students who have been at Ball State for more than one semester, five said that they currently had a medium to high level of homesickness; two said the same in regards to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, four students indicated that their level of homesickness increased from their first semester at Ball State to their current semester. Only two students indicated that their homesickness declined. It is surprising that these students feel more homesick now than during their first semester. The expected outcome was for students to feel less homesick the longer they were at Ball State, as they became more acclimated to American culture. Students’ increased homesickness may be explained with the help of the international student identity model; these students may be taking a longer time to go through the phases of identity development.

Four students – including two who indicated their level of homesickness had increased – noted that their level of isolation declined. These responses imply that while some students have made connections with people at Ball State, they still do not feel completely comfortable here. These particular students may be in the emergence phase of Kim’s international student identity model. During the emergence phase, students have a sort of identity crisis as they attempt to reconcile their old identity with the values and ways of thinking prevalent in the host culture (2012, p. 109). This attempt to branch out while still feeling connected to the home culture may result in students feeling low isolation but high homesickness.

Six of the respondents were currently in their first semester at Ball State; five of them reported low levels of both homesickness and isolation, despite not being very involved on

campus and/or having few interactions with their resident assistant. There could be many reasons for this. One could be that these students are still in the “honeymoon” stage of their study abroad experience. Being in the US is still new and exciting, so these students do not yet feel severe homesickness or isolation. In addition, five of these students are from the same country. Being around people from the same place, who have similar values and perspectives, may have a major impact on how homesick these students feel. It is even possible these students have not yet identified their homesickness, as they have no other semester abroad for comparison.

Overall, there did not appear to be any correlation between a student’s frequency of interaction with their resident assistant and the student’s level of homesickness or isolation. Some students rarely interacted with their resident assistant and felt little loneliness or homesickness; some of the students who interacted with their resident assistant more frequently felt the same. Interactions with other students in the community seemed to have more of an effect.

The importance of interactions with other students is best illustrated by responses to the question “What do you like about where you live?” Fifteen respondents – 75 percent – said they liked the social aspect of living in the residence halls. A student from Japan commented that “[m]any of my dormmates respect cultural difference, and they sometimes try to learn our culture! They don’t see me as one Asian girl but as one person/friend.” A student from China said that she likes Studebaker East because she can “meet different people from various countries.” These comments show that students value the social opportunities of living in a residence hall.

Students were also asked where they met their friends after coming to Ball State. Sixteen students (80 percent) said that they met their friends in the residence halls; this is much larger

than the next highest response - classes. There were also 13 students who said they had made friends who are from the United States. This is a significant result because over half of the respondents said they liked having friends in the residence hall, and having friends from the host culture is an important factor in international students' adaptation process. Some students did not like certain aspects of living in a residence hall, such as the size of the rooms or the cleanliness of the bathrooms, but this may be due either to personal preferences or cultural differences in accommodation.

The environment of the residence halls has clearly been conducive to social connections between international students and American students, since 80 percent of the respondents said that they met their friends in the residence halls. Social integration and support is crucial to students' success, and it appears that international students have found good social support in their residence hall communities. Integrated residence halls, like Studebaker East, are beneficial to international students as they go through their transition process. The International and Modern Languages LLC, by putting students with similar academic and social interests in the same living environment, has been successful as an integrated residence hall.

What can residence life staff do?

The results of this study can affect how residence life staff – both paraprofessionals and professionals – interact with and support international students. Residence hall staff should focus on developing models or programs to support international students beyond their first semester abroad. These models/programs must meet the learning outcomes of Housing and Residence Life while addressing the unique needs of international students. Many times the focus is on providing opportunities and support for students when they first arrive in the United States. In subsequent semesters, returning international students can be overlooked as staff focuses on new

arrivals. Students may need more than one semester to adjust, so it is crucial that they feel supported in their living environment beyond the first semester. For example, creating a programming model that addresses each individual stage of students' identity development, through active or passive initiatives, may be helpful to international students.

It is important, however, to recognize that homesickness is a natural part of the study abroad experience. The social life of the residence halls prevents most students from feeling isolated, but social interaction alone cannot alleviate homesickness. Residence life staff should not try to eliminate homesickness, but they should try to provide students with resources and tools to better manage it. Being aware of where students are in the transition process can guide residence hall staff in what resources and support to offer to students.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study, which may have affected the research results. One limitation is the method of obtaining respondents. The surveys were available for a limited time in the Studebaker East lobby. Students with night classes or organizational activities, for example, may have been unable to complete the survey. Many of the respondents also were encouraged by their resident assistants and/or hall director to respond to the survey, which may have affected who responded to the study. The sample was generally limited to Studebaker East residents; their experiences in the undergraduate International Living-Learning Community may be quite different from the experiences of an international student in a different residence hall. Additionally, the students surveyed were all the same age as traditional American undergraduates. Older international undergraduates may not have the same view of the residence hall living, as their needs are different from traditional undergraduate students. Graduate students may also feel differently about the residence hall experience.

For future studies, it would be beneficial to ask international students how the residence halls affect their adaptation in other areas, such as academics or cultural competency. It would also be helpful to ask students what types of support they feel are missing from their residence hall experience. Do they wish they received more cross-cultural education in their residence hall? Do they feel that their self-development is supported within the residence hall environment and by residence hall staff? Another suggestion is to look at student interactions with resident assistants. Instead of asking only about the frequency of interactions, students could be asked about the *types* of interactions they have with their resident assistant. Addressing these questions would give a more complete understanding of how students interact with different parts of the residence hall environment.

Conclusion

International students have had a generally positive social experience in the residence halls at Ball State. The social living environment makes international students feel less isolated from those around them, aiding in their transition process. As one-third of students indicated, having friends in the residence halls has made them feel less homesick during their time abroad. Current research shows that making friends is one of the most important tools international students use to cope with the difficulties of being in a new culture. At the same time, the social aspect of residence life does not address all the challenges of being an international student. Several students have struggled to manage their transition, so it is important for professional and paraprofessional staff to provide developmental opportunities – besides social interaction – for international students.

Appendix
International Student Transition Survey

1. What is your age?

- ☐ 18
☐ 19
☐ 20
☐ 21

- ☐ 22
☐ 23
☐ 24 and above

2. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female

- ☐ Transgender
☐ Other

3. What is your major?

4. Including the current semester, how many semesters have you attended Ball State?

- ☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4

- ☐ 5
☐ 6
☐ 7
☐ 8

5. In what residence hall do you live?

6. What is your home country?

7. What is your native language?

8. What is your level of fluency in English?

- ☐ Basic
☐ Intermediate

- ☐ Fluent
☐ Native speaker

9. How homesick did you feel during your first semester at Ball State?

Not at all homesick 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely homesick

10. How homesick do you feel during your current semester at Ball State? (Please only answer if you have been at Ball State for more than 1 semester)

Not at all homesick 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely homesick

11. Why did/didn't you feel homesick during your first semester?

12. How isolated did you feel during your first semester at Ball State?

Not at all isolated 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely isolated

13. How isolated do you feel during your current semester at Ball State? (Please only answer if you have been at Ball State for more than 1 semester)

Not at all isolated 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely isolated

14. Why did/didn't you feel isolated during your first semester?

15. How often do you participate in extracurricular activities?

- ☐ Less than once a month
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ More than 3 times a week
- ☐ 2-3 times per month

16. What are some of the activities you are involved in?

17. Have you made any new friends since coming to Ball State?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

18. Where did you meet most of your new friends?

- ☐ Classes
 - ☐ Residence hall
 - ☐ Extracurricular activity
- ☐ Campus event
 - ☐ Other

19. What are the home countries of most of your new friends?

- ☐ United States
- ☐ Your home country
- ☐ Other

20. How satisfied are you with your current living situation?

Extremely dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 Completely satisfied

21. What do you like about where you live?

22. What do you dislike about where you live?

23. How often do you interact with your resident assistant?

- ☐ About once a month or less
- ☐ About 2-3 days a month
- ☐ About once a week
- ☐ Almost every day

24. How often do you attend programs or events in your residence hall?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 All the time

25. Do you have any other comments about your residence hall?

References

- Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(4), 13–23.
- Andrade, M. S. (2009). The effects of English language proficiency on adjustment to university life. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 3(1), 16-34. DOI: 10.1080/193131550802668249
- Hayes, R. L., & Lin, H. (1994). Coming to America: Developing social support systems for international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 22(1), 7-16.
- Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, R. K. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(3), 281-295.
- Institute of International Education. (2013). *International students: Academic level*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Academic-Level/2011-13>
- Kim, E. (2012). An alternative theoretical model: Examining psychosocial identity development of international students in the United States. *College Student Journal*, 46(1), 99-113.
- Lin, J., & Yi, J. K. (1997). Asian international students' adjustment: Issues and program suggestions. *College Student Journal*, 31(4), 473-477.
- McLachlan, D. A., & Justice, J. (2009). A grounded theory of international student well-being. *Journal of Theory Construction & Testing*, 13(1), 27-32.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177–182.

- Slabaugh, S. (2013, November 21). Saudi, Chinese students flock to Ball State. *The Indianapolis Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2013/11/21/saudi-chinese-students-flock-to-ball-state/3662111/>
- Tseng, W., & Newton, F. B. (2002). International students' strategies for well-being. *College Student Journal*, 36(4), 591.



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5070

DATE: February 18, 2014

TO: Michelle Lisack

FROM: Ball State University IRB

RE: IRB protocol # 565394-1

TITLE: International Student Transition

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

DECISION DATE: February 18, 2014

REVIEW TYPE: EXEMPT

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on February 18, 2014 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record.

Exempt Categories:

	Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
X	Category 2: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior
	Category 3: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under category 2, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) Federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.
	Category 4: Research involving the collection of study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

	Category 5: Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of Department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under these programs.
	Category 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed which contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

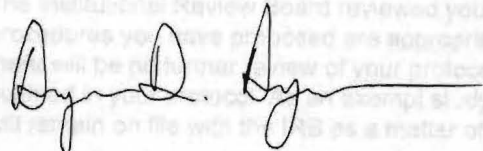
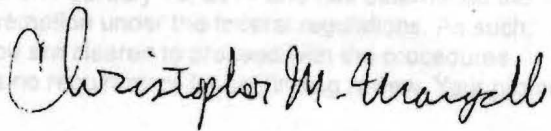
Editorial Notes:

1. Approved- Exempt February 18, 2014

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. **Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project.** Please contact (ORI Staff) if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (<http://www.bsu.edu/irb>) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on February 18, 2014 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for this study under the federal regulations. As such, this study will be reviewed as an exempt study. There is no continuing review required for this study. This decision will remain on file with this protocol as a matter of record.

Exempt Categories:

Bryan Byers, PhD/Chair
Institutional Review Board

Christopher Mangelli, JD, MS, MEd, CIP/Director
Office of Research Integrity

x	Category 2: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior or instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
	Category 3: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under category 2, if (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed officials or candidates for public office, or (ii) Federal statutes, regulations, without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.
	Category 4: Research involving the collection of study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.